(b) whether Government is also aware that Israel Government has put the entire population of two million people in Gaza inside a cage, cut off electricity, stopped medicines and food supplies to them; and

(c) if so, Government's reaction thereto?

THE MINISTER OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI PRANAB MUKHERJEE): (a) Yes.

(b) and (c) Government have been closely monitoring the situation in the occupied Palestinian territories, including the Gaza Strip. The matter has been the subject of an exchange of notes between the Foreign Minister of Egypt and the Minister of External Affairs. Government have also issued statements on the matter on January 18, 2008, February 11, 2008, March 1, 2008 and March 7, 2008. The subject was also touched upon in the *suo motu* statement of the Minister of External Affairs made in both Houses of Parliament on March 3, 2008. In the statements, Government have condemned the escalation of violence on all sides, urged restraint and expressed India's readiness to assist, including on the humanitarian aspects, in order to relieve the sufferings of the Palestinian people. Government remain engaged on the subject.

Restriction on Indian workers in Malaysia

†1466. SHRI PYARELAL KHANDELWAL: Will the Minister of OVERSEAS INDIAN AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether it is a fact that Government of Malaysia has imposed restrictions on Indian workers in their country;

(b) if so, the details thereof and reaction of Government thereto; and

(c) the details of steps taken by Government to safeguard interests of Indain workers residing in Malaysia?

THE MINISTER OF OVERSEAS INDIAN AFFAIRS (SHRI VAYALAR RAVI): (a) and (b) No, Sir. As per the report received from the High Commission of India in Kuala Lumpur the Minister of Home Affairs of Malaysia has categorically denied any move to limit the intake of workers from India. However, it has been informed that all foreign priests have to now go through more stringent checks. The Malaysian Minister of Home Affairs has denied that Indian temple priests were being prevented from coming to Malaysia; and

(c) Steps are a foot for signing a bilateral Memorandum of Understanding on Labour & Manpower Development between Malaysia and India, which will provide for an institutional framework to facilitate employment, protection and welfare of Indian workers in Malaysia. Negotiations have been completed and the MoU has been finalized. The MoU will be signed after completing the internal procedures by both countries.

Plight of HSMP Visa Holder

1467. SHRI DARA SINGH:
SHRI RAMDAS AGARWAL:

Will the Minsiter of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether Government is aware of U.K. Government's unsympathetic stand towards non-EEA (European Economic Authority) immigrants, majority of whom are Indians;

† Original notice of the question was received in Hindi.

(b) whether Executive Director of the Highly Skilled Migrants Programme (HSMP) forum, representing highly skilled Indians in the UK has urged Indian Government to take up plight of HSMP visa holders with British Prime Minister's recent visit to India because fate of thirty thousand Indians is at stake and they are likely to face deportation; and

(c) if so, the reaction of British Prime Minister thereto?

THE MINISTER OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI PRANAB MUKHERJEE): (a) Yes.

(b) Yes.

(c) The Joint Statement signed by the two Prime Ministers at the conclusion of the India-UK Summit on January 21, 2008 noted the importance of facilitating movement of professionals across a broad range of sectors of interest to both sides.

Passport office in Tamil Nadu

1468. SHRI S. ANBALAGAN: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether the Union Government proposes to open any passport office in the State of Tamil Nadu;

(b) if so, the details of the place where the new passport office is proposed to be opened and if not, the reasons therefor;

(c) the number of passport applications received and the number of passports issued during the stipulated time period during each of the last three years, passport office-wise in the State; and

(d) the reasons for pendency in issuing the passports?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI E. AHAMMED): (a) and (b) Yes. It is proposed to open a new Passport Office in Coimbatore.

(c) The total number of passport applications received and the number of passports issued during last three years by the Passport Offices in Tamil Nadu are given below:

Passport Office	Number of Passport Applications received			Number of Passports issued		
	2005	2006	2007	2005	2006	2007
Chennai	237561	291916	299488	212143	300503	305238
Tiruchirappalli	225403	279713	287862	220429	303684	285627
Madurai (opened in December 2007)	—	—	2965	—	—	346

(d) There are several reasons for pendencies in Passport Offices. These include: Delays in receipt of Police Verification Reports (PVRs) and adverse/incomplete PVRs; incomplete